

Four Gospel Trajectories

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One kind of evidence for sequence in time is plausible developments: trajectories. I here identify four trajectories in the New Testament Gospels, Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, and find that they imply the sequence Mk > Mt > Lk > Jn.

1. The Divinization Trajectory. Jesus in **Mark** is a man. He first makes contact with God at his Baptism (Mk 1:10, “Straightway . . . he saw the heavens rent asunder, and the Spirit as a dove descending upon him”). His divine power is drained in use (Mk 5:30, “perceiving . . . that the power from him had gone forth”), renewed by prayer (Mk 9:29, “This kind [of demon] can come out by nothing, save by prayer”), and lost at his Crucifixion (Mk 15:34, “My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?”). **Matthew** gives Jesus a divine birth (Mt 1:18, “Mary . . . was found with child of the Holy Spirit”), thus making him godlike from the beginning. **Luke** tops this by giving his cousin John the Baptist also a divine birth (Lk 1:36f, the angel to Mary: “And behold, Elizabeth thy kinswoman . . . hath conceived a son in her old age”), and by having John acknowledge Jesus prenatally (Lk 1:41, “When Elizabeth heard the salutation of Mary, the babe leaped in her womb”). In **John**, Jesus exists from the beginning of the universe (Jn 1:1, “In the beginning was the Word;” 1:14, “And the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us”). Founders are often aggrandized by their followers, and nothing could be more natural than this increasing divinization of Jesus, and the associated reluctance to ascribe to him any human feelings or shortcomings.¹ The implied order is Mk > Mt > Lk > Jn.

2. The Mary Trajectory. Mary is rejected by Jesus in **Mark** (Mk 3:33f, “Who are my mother and brothers?”). In **Matthew**, Mary is favored by God to be Jesus’ mother (Mt 1:20f, the angel to Joseph: “Do not fear to take Mary your wife, for that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit”). In **Luke** Mary reacts fully and eloquently to the news that she is to be so favored (Lk 1:46f, the Magnificat). Luke adds a childhood narrative of Jesus in the Temple, where Mary speaks to Jesus (Lk 2:41-51). In **John**, for reasons above noted, there is no birth scene, but Mary is part of Jesus’ ministry. She persuades him to perform his first miracle at Cana (Jn 2:3f, Mary to the servants: “Whatsoever he saith unto you, do it”), and at the end is touchingly commended by him, from the very cross, to the care of a disciple (Jn 19:26f, “Jesus . . . saith unto his mother, Woman, behold thy son. Then saith he to the disciple, Behold thy mother”). It is emotionally unlikely that the later Jesus tradition increasingly *disdained* Mary. The implied order is Mk > Mt > Lk > Jn.

¹For a long list of instances where Matthew shows greater respect for Jesus in passages parallel to Mark, see the commentary of Willoughby C Allen (3rd Clark 1912) xxxi-xxxiii.

3. The Baptism Trajectory. In **Mark**, Jesus is simply baptized by John (Mk 1:9). In **Matthew**, John protests that Jesus should baptize *him*, and is persuaded to proceed only in order “to fulfil all righteousness” (Mt 3:15). In **Luke**, the baptism is mentioned but not described (Lk 3:21b). As in Mark and Matthew, Luke’s verb is the passive “was baptized,” but John is not specified as the *agent* of the verb. In **John**, the baptism is not even reported; only the detail of the Spirit as a dove resting on Jesus (Jn 1:32f). Jesus’ baptism may have been offensive as implying that John was Jesus’ spiritual superior, or that Jesus had sins to be forgiven. The gradual attenuation of the baptism in the Gospel accounts is compatible with the divinization trajectory noticed above, and with the theological idea that Jesus’ death had the power to atone for others’ sins because Jesus was himself without sin. The implied order is Mk > Mt > Lk > Jn.

4. The Jerusalem Trajectory. In all the Gospels, Galilee is Jesus’ home country; his first preaching is done there. Jerusalem figures in the Jesus story in different ways. In **Mark**, Jesus visits many Galilean towns, and goes to Jerusalem only to be crucified. The disciples return to Galilee, and though the ending of Mark is missing in our text, it is predicted (Mk 14:28, 16:7) that Jesus will appear to them there. In **Matthew**, some of Jesus’ preaching is done on his journey to Jerusalem, and three Galilean towns, Chorazin, Bethsaida, and Capernaum, are cursed as unbelieving (Mt 11:21-24); the risen Jesus first appears in Jerusalem, to the Women at the Tomb (Mt 28:9-10), though there is also a later Galilean appearance, of the kind that was predicted if not displayed in Mark (Mt 28:16f). In **Luke**, the risen Jesus not only appears on the road from Jerusalem, but orders the disciples to *remain* in Jerusalem (Lk 24:15f); there is no Galilee appearance. **John**, like Luke, limits the appearances of the risen Jesus to Jerusalem;² he has Jesus visit Jerusalem repeatedly before that, and often preach there. The Jerusalem shift in the Jesus story is thus furthest advanced in John.

A Galilee-to-Jerusalem shift in the history of Christianity is attested by Paul, who never mentions Galilee, and who visits Jerusalem (not Galilee) to meet with Peter, and incidentally one Jacob whom he thinks of as the brother of Jesus (Gal 1:18). It seems that the Gospels increasingly project that later administrative shift back into Jesus’ lifetime, so the least Jerusalemized Gospel will probably also be the earliest Gospel. The implied order is Mk > Mt > Lk > Jn.

Conclusion. More examples might be given, but these show how the winds are blowing. All the winds blow in the same direction. They amount to three trends: (1) increasing respect for Jesus and his family, (2) reduction in the prominence given to John’s baptism of Jesus; and (3) an administrative shift of the later Jesus movement from Galilee to Jerusalem. It is these trends (the first predictable on general grounds) that differences in the Gospels seem to reflect. Complications there surely are, some due to growth processes in one or more Gospel, but the overall pattern is clear.

Such developments are strong evidence for the Historical Jesus. Enthusiasm (as for Mary) proves nothing, but embarrassment (as concerning John) is quite another matter. If there was no baptism, why do the Gospels increasingly minimize its importance? And if John baptized him, then there probably was a Jesus there to be baptized.

²Save for the inconsistent, and clearly later appended, final chapter, Jn 21.